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Things That Are — God's

by C. Franklin
Miller



"Every morning I took up my stand along the Bowery and cried my wares. No one could have recognized in my aged and tottering frame the body of Ramon Clavell."

I WAS born with the seal of Satan on my heart. People called me damned. Some there were who laid it to heredity and saw in me the reincarnation of that evil spirit which had poisoned the Clavell blood from generations past. Ours was a lineage of moral degenerates and I the last of the accursed lot.

Of my more remote ancestry I have little knowledge; but the whispered tales of their misspent lives rivaled, in ghastliness, some of the bloodiest chapters in history. Originating as they did in the hectic career of one Henri Clavell—an individual who had dipped his fingers deeply in the terrors of the Inquisition—those tales now ring unspeakably vile. With horror and bloodshed they fairly reek; but to me they were all enthralling.

Of my immediate descent memory serves me well. I can picture with startling vividness the leering countenance of my grandsire, "Wolf" Clavell, who swung on the gallows for a monstrous crime he gloried in. An ax had been his weapon, hatred his passion, a baby his victim. He had shown no mercy and in his brazenly corrupted state he begged none. He died an infidel, swearing unforgettable vengeance against humanity.

One of his sons was a madman—vicious, uncontrollable. The other,

my father, ended his days in a felon's cell, cursing the very intonation of the priest who prayed to bring him comfort. I witnessed his burial; but I could not mourn. My eyes were dry, my heart cold. The solemnity of the rites bored me. In the midst of the service I quit the grave and wandered homeward. It was then that I took up the thread of my forebears and wove such a life of infamy and horror as to brand me indeed a thing of Satan.

"It is in the blood," people would mutter over my early misdeeds. "The lad's a Clavell—possessed of the devil!" This they believed, and scowled upon me as they might upon some vexatious sore which refused to be healed. I, Ramon Clavell, was a problem. All their knowledge of criminal psychology could not solve me. With a warped sense of loyalty I hugged the abomination of the Clavell history to my heart and lauded the atrocities committed by my progenitors. I recognized no wrong-doing. I knew no evil. I experienced only an overwhelming resentment at the rebukes administered—an insane hatred of all things retarding my lawless development.

Mine was a body without a soul—an automaton of flesh and bone totally lacking in conscience. Of this I am now convinced.

Socially I was ostracized; playmates I had none. In that somber village of Mont Clare superstition ran amuck and the children of the neighborhood set me apart as one bewitched. They uttered my name in awe-filled tones and disappeared like magic at my approach. If, by chance, I encountered any of them unawares, the fear and horror they displayed convulsed me with laughter. At such times only my lack of strength prevented bloodshed, for, strange as it may seem, I was a weakling.

But I wanted to kill! I would have done so with a smile upon my lips

and in all probability flaunted the fact at the trial. In me there rankled a stinging bitterness against all mankind and I yearned to destroy this thing that galled me. I brooded over the thought for hours at a time, up in my ever-gloomy chamber under the rafters. There, wild schemes I wove to insure my triumph; and the schemes were always cunning, devilish, for I was painfully aware of my physical limitations.

At such times when I brooded, my mother came to me with soft-toned words and gentle hands. "Unhappy Ann" they called her in the village; but a more patient, long-suffering soul never breathed. She must have understood. "Ramon," she would plead with tear-dimmed eyes, "there is a God—and He is good. We must only love and pray." And then she would sink to her knees and raise her face to heaven.

I can see her now—coarsely clad, work-weary, face hardened and seamed with suffering—but my chiseled heart was blind. I would have none of Him. Out of the depths of mine iniquity I cursed that kneeling form. I jeered at her, abused and reviled her. In me there was no love—for love is of the soul. I wanted to be left alone to perfect my nefarious schemes, and her very presence, her words, her tears, almost drove me frantic. Once, in a frenzy of rage, I flew at her with clawing nails and tore a long, bloody gash along her cheek. With a deep, lingering cry which now haunts me day and night, but meant nothing to me then, she collapsed at my feet and I returned to my brooding.

I WAS still in my teens when I first developed this hollow, racking cough which now draws blood. Oft-times in my dreams a violent spasm would attack me and I would fight my way back to consciousness through a roaring hell of breathless torture.

My mother consulted the village doctor. He shook his head. No skill on earth could cure me. "An early death" was his grim-voiced prophecy.

Even then I experienced no fear. Death of itself held no terror for me—not even the horror of a slow, ereeping death for which I was destined. My only concern lay in the culmination of my plans, and it was the thought of failure which brought my first scheme to maturity.

I would study. I would learn. I would gain a wide knowledge of the arts and sciences and thus lend depth to my cunning. Ere death claimed me I would bring down upon mankind such a cataclysm of misery and suffering as to make even their vaunted God tremble on His throne. To this end I applied myself, working feverishly against time, for I remembered that grim-voiced prophecy.

Outwardly I became a religious zealot. The staid patriarchs of the village marveled at the change and solemnly wagged their heads over the noticeable disease which ravaged me. "It is the work of God," they murmured, and welcomed me with outstretched arms when I made my first appearance on the steps of St. Mary's.

They chanted of love and of redemption that day. They spoke of the lost sheep and its return to the fold. They sang hymns of praise and of thanksgiving. But what a smoldering demon they harbored in their midst! My very presence was a mockery. I heard them through and to every prayer I murmured an amen of blasphemy.

Day and night my calloused brain and eager fingers were busy in perfecting a medium of annihilation—a powerful explosive, a dustlike powder whose reaction to ordinary water was to be little short of cyclonic. The entire village became my laboratory. Secretly I spread the powder for its initial test. Came the fall of rain,

and a deafening explosion threw the town into a state of panic. My heart rejoiced. The thing was workable, and the little chapel of St. Mary's my first victim.

Thereafter, my progress was maddeningly slow. True, I managed to destroy much property and some few lives; but the havoc wrought was insufficient to cause the wholesale deaths of which I dreamed.

For more than a year I confined my experiments to the village of Mont Clare. The consternation I provoked among those God-fearing people was my only comfort. I reveled in the fear that stamped their faces, in the haunted gleam that filled their eyes.

Gradually, however, the first surge of religious ardor diminished and they looked for a more practical explanation of the mystery. I came within their line of vision. They recalled my sinful extraction, my former penchant for destruction, and all their stored-up anger descended like a flood about me.

I fled southward and buried myself here among the teeming thousands of the metropolis. Money I had none; but my aptitude in picking locks and manipulating dials made it possible for me to equip a little laboratory on the top floor of a squalid tenement.

Then, weeks later, there came a rap upon my door—sharp and insistent. After some hesitation I opened it. A stocky, square-shouldered man pushed his way in and cast a searching glance around. He was unknown to me and I inquired of his errand.

"Just wanted to see your layout," was his crisp reply. "Queer place for a laboratory."

My hand closed on a phial of vitriol resting on a shelf behind me and I threw it. He dodged the deadly missile and pinned me to the floor. He smiled as he snapped the steel around

my wrists. For a moment only I gazed into those quiet, efficient eyes of his; but in that moment was born in me such an intense hatred for the man as to eclipse temporarily my scheme for world-wide destruction.

His name was Kennedy—a plain-clothes man of marked ability. As an untangler of mysteries his fame had traveled beyond the ranks of the metropolitan force, and it was at this, his pride, that I vowed to strike back.

For ten years within the cold gray walls of Sing Sing I plotted and schemed against this presumptuous being—my nemesis. My weaving brain clothed him with every hateful characteristic of mankind. I saw reflected in him all law, all order, all restriction, and I set him up as a symbol of humanity—the humanity I would exterminate.

The mystery of the Mont Clare disasters he had solved; the perpetrator of those crimes he had found; but I would create a problem that would baffle him completely. I would toy with him and laugh—and then I would put an end to him.

This thought wove itself into every fiber of my being; but at first it seemed hopeless. I was sentenced for life while my gnawing malady was making steady progress. Gradually, however, I noticed a growing sympathy for my condition among my fellow convicts, and I played up to it with a cunning born of desperation. An escape was being planned by four of them and I managed to worm my way into their schemes. A guard was bribed, weapons secured, and I took part in that famous "break" in the summer of 1925, when two prisoners escaped and three were shot. This, after a confinement of ten years.

For weeks I lay hidden along the Hudson, gloating over my freedom and nursing my scheme for vengeance. It was only the thought of Kennedy that saved me from collapse—only the memory of his triumphant

smile that gave me the strength to fight. When, finally, I returned to my old haunts (the tenements) I harbored a well-matured plan for his destruction.

My personal appearance was altered considerably. I had acquired a studied limp and walked with drooping shoulders. My face was seamed and hairy; my body trembled as if with the ague. No one could have recognized in my aged and tottering frame the body of Ramon Clavell.

Adhering to my plan, I changed my name. I became a character. People now knew me as "Pap" Hawkins, a peddler of trifling nicknacks. Every morning I took up my stand along the Bowery and cried my wares. Every evening I hobbled homeward with my two suit-cases filled with innocent odds and ends. Kennedy I sometimes met and the sight of him drove me into a cold fury; but he always passed me by without recognition.

FOR a matter of months I played my part, patiently marking time until my new identity had been thoroughly established; but my wasting disease was a constant reminder of the necessity for early action. Death was not far distant.

And then I knew that the hour had come. It was a night of storm—a cold, driving storm that came raging out of the North with all the abandon of a wild thing and swayed my pulse with magnetic touch. An impatient exhilaration seized me as I made my preparations and waited for the house to slumber. Then with my bags in hand I stole up the darkened stairway, through the scuttle and on to the rain-swept roof. Hugging the coping closely I fought the storm, fearful lest the one thing I had left to chance should wreck my plans; but finally I found that which I sought—an unlatched trap on a neighboring roof—and through this I descended.

The passage was in darkness and unfamiliar. From somewhere to my left there came the dismal sound of fitful dreaming. I crept stealthily along, found a door and listened. All was quiet within, and I entered.

The room was black. Above I could hear the chatter of rain on the skylight. For a time I crouched, motionless, harkening to the steady respiration of someone sleeping. Apparently there was only one tenant.

Carefully I picked my way across the narrow chamber and found the bed. A bit of ether, a saturated rag, and the occupant was at my mercy. An unholy enthusiasm seized me. Kennedy's smiling face was ever uppermost in my mind. Deliberately, methodically, I set to work on one of the most revolting crimes that ever shocked the souls of men, and when I had finished, my waiting bags were laden with the severed flesh and bones of a human body.

I was pleased. The work was well done—just as I had planned it. Carefully I checked over every action. There were no fingerprints (I had worn rubber gloves the while), no thoughtlessly dropped article, no clue of any sort which might serve as a boomerang. So far as the victim was concerned there was not even a motive. I did not know the identity of the body I had outraged. Mine was the perfect crime and, I repeat, I was well pleased. Let Kennedy, the mighty, solve this one—if he could!

Yet, even as I thought of Kennedy, a strange doubt assailed me. In some far recess of my brain it bobbed up with tantalizing aggressiveness and clung there like a leech. I hesitated and frowned into the darkness. Never had I questioned my own sagacity; but in that hour of vengeful triumph I found myself again reviewing my every action.

This noticeable change in my mental methods was more than a puz-

zle. I tried to shake off the obsession; but the doubt grew and burst into a nerve-racking passion wholly unfamiliar to me. I began to breathe quickly; my body trembled; perspiration oozed from every pore; and, with my thoughts in chaos, I fled.

Back in my own quarters I jammed the bags into a closet and set to brooding. But my ease of mind had vanished. I sprang to my feet and paced the floor. The thoughts that haunted me were things of torture. Whence they came I knew not; but my physical reaction was undeniable. On my couch I tossed for hours with the riddle still unsolved and finally sank exhausted into fitful slumber.

For two days I confined myself to my chamber, scarcely giving a thought to food or sleep. My brain grew numb in its continual struggle with that amazing enigma which almost crazed me. A will foreign to my own seemed battling for supremacy within me. It was like the rise of a suppressed soul—the dawn of conscience. The while I grew steadily weaker.

And then came discovery. The yellow journals of the city ran the story under screaming headlines. Kennedy had the case in hand (it was his district), and an arrest was promised within forty-eight hours. Vain promise, I thought, and tried to force a feeling of elation. I even chuckled for a time; but the sound fell with a hollow echo in my ears. That gnawing thing within robbed me of the satisfaction I had anticipated. I was nervous and irritable. Any slight noise caused me to start; but I buried myself in the daily papers and tried to forget.

The identity of the slain one was unknown. A wrinkled old crone had wandered into the district some days before and had rented the room. No one had seen her since.

I re-read the story many times and was conscious of a growing horror. a feeling I had never experienced before. Vaguely I sensed the birth of fear; but I held to my purpose with dogged determination.

As promised, an arrest was made. That same day a bundle tagged as the property of Detective Kennedy was picked up along the Bowery. It contained the withered arms and hands of an old woman.

The following day a second bundle, similarly tagged, was found on the doorsill of a rectory over in the Bronx. Two shrunken and chopped-up limbs were uncovered.

At this the clergy raged; laymen swore; the inefficiency of the metropolitan force was widely condemned. No one suspected tottering "Pap" Hawkins and his innocent-looking bags.

Those mysterious bundles with their gruesome contents were properly linked with the tenement tragedy by some imaginative reporter. Their discovery unleashed a veritable torrent of sarcasm in which Kennedy's fruitless methods were severely scored. The public was clamoring for an arrest and again Kennedy made a promise. The murderer was known and would be apprehended ere the week was out. The case against him was not quite complete. Once more the city waited; but nothing happened.

I glowed with exultation; but it was short-lived. The passion was wholly assumed. I paced my dingy quarters in a turmoil of emotion—enraged, helpless, yet unwilling to relent. My plans called for a second killing, similarly executed, and a third—as many in fact as I found necessary for the wrecking of the man called Kennedy. But that nameless thing which haunted me intruded. It drained me of all will. It encompassed me like a barrier of

steel. Fear, horror, pity, humanity—with these weapons it fought and battered my former self into cowering submission.

Faint and trembling, yet with a wild desire to carry on, I flung wide the door to my hiding place and was, for the first time, nauseated by the pungent odor of death it concealed.

One of my bags was empty. The other I had not yet opened. As I tried to drag it from concealment, it slipped through my hands and tumbled to the floor with a thud. The lid snapped open and out popped that grisly, gray-topped head.

Tottering and swaying, like the aged thing it was, it came weaving across the carpet toward me. Long strands of matted hair quivered snakelike in its wake. Its eyes were open and staring. It seemed to be alive.

I recoiled before it. My limbs were trembling, my heart cold. But on it rolled, slowly, accusingly, and with a final lurch tilted into position at my very feet.

I uttered a cry of horror and stared with burning eyes into its withered, upturned face.

That moment seemed eternity. In a flood of realization the baseness of my life swept before me. Understanding dawned and the shock which knowledge brought was agonizing. A low moan escaped me. I sank to my knees, whipped, groveling, and for the first time called on God.

For there, on that bloodless cheek where I had implanted it in youth, sprawled a jagged, purple-edged scar!

And now I wait for death. The shadows are closing in. Beside me rests the head, mute testimony of the one undying love man knows. I murmur a prayer and from within my wasted shell vibrates a responsive chord—comforting, reassuring—the voice of the soul that now inhabits me—my mother.